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#### 4.—*Notes of a Journey among the Woolwa and Mosquito Indians.*

By G. H. WICKHAM, Esq.

(EXTRACTS.)

At daybreak on the 5th November I started for the Blewfields, or, as it is sometimes called, the Woolwa River (from the Indian tribe which inhabits its banks). The river flows into the northern extremity of the Lagoon, by many mouths lined with mangrove thickets, now destroyed, like everything else, by the late hurricane.

For my journey I had engaged a large pit-pan, or river canoe, and three men, Nach (head man), his son, and a mixed Mosquito man called Teribio, who was going home to his Woolwa wives (of which he had two) at Kissalala.

The course of the river is exceedingly serpentine. We reached the first Woolwa settlement, called Kissalala, and climbing the steep bank came to the first Indian lodge. I found myself in what appeared quite another world of manners and customs, and which made a strange impression upon me, such as in all probability I should never feel again. The inmates, however, apparently took little notice of me further than to motion me to one of the low cedar stools, and then left me to make myself at home. The women, in their decidedly light apparel, continued to busy themselves at the fires, from time to time stirring the contents of their large pots with long-handled wooden spoons; the men went on tipping their arrows and carefully testing their straightness and balance by looking along them while held at arm's length. They said that a sea-captain once came up the river as far as this place. They described him as having taken a sketch of the lodge, with the women in the act of grinding corn.

It seems probable that the curious custom of flattening the forehead, which so largely prevails among the aboriginal American tribes, had its origin in a desire to increase the characteristic formation of the head, which they would naturally enough consider the highest type of beauty. The Woolwa, however, does not practice this fashion to the extent that some other of the American tribes do, and their hair, worn hanging to the eyebrows in front, grows so thickly that a casual observer would hardly notice any unusual flatness in the skull. It is interesting to observe the effect produced by modes of living on the figures of the different tribes and races of man. Among the Woolwas I noticed large developments about the arms and chest, while the lower part of the body was often inclined to be squat. This is without doubt caused by spending most of their time, as they do, in paddling, poling, and hauling their canoes up the creeks and rapid rivers of their country. Indeed, they are essentially canoe-men, as the "civilized" Indians in the district of Matagalpa are pedestrians.

The Woolwa places of burial are always in the vicinity of the river-banks, and are marked by a large thatched shed similar in its construction to the lodges inhabited by these Indians. This is built over the place of interment, and the whole place is sedulously kept clean of bush growth.

These Indians have a curious mode of playing with staves or short poles. They take these poles and grasp them in the centre, and standing opposite each other hold them at arm's length, striking each end alternately together with all their force. They are matched in pairs, and in appearance it puts one in mind of the old English quarter-staff play. The object of the game is to see who can keep up the continual strain upon the muscles of the arm longest, and ultimately strike the staff from the hand of his opponent.

The Woolwas have many strange customs attendant upon their coming of age. The young men have to pass through many physical ordeals before they are fully admitted to the privileges of man's estate. Among other ordeals they have to sustain heavy blows on the back, given after their manner with

the elbow. This, although well enough for the strong, must press heavily upon the weak. The rest are of a similar character; their main object being seemingly to ascertain what amount of physical suffering they can endure. It seems probable that these customs are but the remnants of more useful exercises, calculated to enure them to suffering, and to strengthen and educate their bodies in the art of war, at a time when they were a more numerous and warlike people than they are at the present time. These Indians must be expert swimmers, as they usually bathe several times in the day; but an opportunity of observing them rarely occurred, as when either the men or women wished to bathe, they went down to the landing-place where their canoes were moored, stepped into one and dropped down the stream to some secluded spot where they could go through their ablutions unobserved.

The Woolwas seem now to have no chief of their own. They go to Blewfields to settle any little difficulties that may arise, which is not often the case, nor have they villages, of any size, but live in lodges, two or three grouped together, and scattered at intervals along the main river and its tributaries. These lodges have no walls, but are open on all sides. The thatch has generally a neat appearance, especially from the inside, and is generally decorated with the lower jaw-bones of the peccary and warry or wild hog, &c., and also the bleached skulls of large fish. Sometimes there are stages made of split bamboo for storing away dry maize, &c., and bows and arrows (the only weapon which they now use of their own manufacture) are stuck into the binding of the thatch. A wretched old gun or two obtained from the traders in exchange for their canoes or india-rubber, &c., an axe and a few rusty machetes, stones for grinding corn, their own earthenware pots, which are decidedly picturesque in shape, and in which they cook their food, and perhaps a cast-iron one obtained from the traders, some odd-looking little bags suspended under the eaves with pieces of native cloth hanging on the supporting beams; a cradle with the dried claws of crabs and other things attached to it, making a strange rattling noise when it is rocked, often heard at night when all else is still, and a few stools, complete the furniture. There are generally three or four families in each lodge, each having their fire in one of the corners, at which they cook their own plantains, &c., and round which they sit and chat. There are generally a set of the most wretchedly miserable-looking curs that can be imagined on the look-out for what they can steal. The Indians are very fond of taming wild animals for pets. You rarely stop at a village where you do not see parrots and parroquets, monkeys or tame waray or peccary. At one place I saw a little boy running about with a tame otter, here called "water-dog."

The following day we went on to the next settlement of Woolwas, a small village of about four families. Passed two rapids, at one of which we had to take out the things and haul the pit-pan over. The Indians were very civil, knocking down the ripest oranges from the trees, and doing many other little things to please us. I passed the night here, and next morning started up the river again. Next morning we dropped down the river as far as Kissalala, and passed some time in this place.

During the wet weather the Blewfields River rises with astonishing rapidity, and the current becomes very swift and turbid, bearing along with it logs and trees. At such times the upper part of the river becomes quite impassable, boiling and seething as it does over the huge boulders which block up its bed.

The women had been preparing mishla for some days past. The preparation of this drink is a very disgusting process, but is, I believe, in some way connected with their religious belief, whatever that may be. I have been led to think that this is the case from there not being the same jolliness that there is when they hold their carousals, with drinks made from banana and sugar-cane, and others of that nature. Mishla is a general name for all kinds of drink; but unless some other name is affixed, it is generally understood to mean that

made from cassada. When they intend giving one of these feasts or ceremonies the whole community club together and collect a large quantity of cassada, which they then set about chewing, spitting it afterwards into one of their large earthen pots; when their jaws get so tired that they are obliged to desist they boil the remainder, and after mixing the whole together let it stand for a day or so until it has fermented, keeping it stirred and skimmed. People are invited, and come from a great distance to attend these "drinks." They are then to be seen in their full costumes of paint, feathers, and beads, some of them wear a sort of coronet made from the curly head-feathers of the curassow, which often looks very tasteful. A cord around the upper arm, to which are attached feathers of the macaw, downy owl, and the yellow tail-feathers of the *Cetinops Montezuma*. Around their necks the men wear the small opaque beads they get from the Blewfields traders, worked by themselves into long pendant bands, often of very pretty patterns. These hang down in front of the body, with tassels of white beads fastened to a broad collar (of similar work to the bands which hang down the back. The "townoo" or "pulpra," as the Moskitos call it, is a cloth worn by the men round the waist; the ends hang down between the legs, generally below the knee; in some of the young dandies it reaches to the ground. The "townoo," like the sheeting in which they wrap themselves at night, is made of the bark of a tree beaten out by the women on a smooth log with a mallet shaped like a club, the grooves of which give it a texture and the appearance of a mash; the women also make them sometimes of a very stout and handsome cotton material, dyed with many colours, woven into tasteful patterns; sometimes they mix it with the down and feathers of birds.\* These do not seem to be used often now, probably from the time and labour they take in the making. The women on full-dress occasions wear a great quantity of beads round the neck; but, unlike the men, they do not work them into designs, simply taking the bunch as they get it from the trader, and fastening the ends behind the neck. They must be greatly inconvenienced on full-dress occasions; at such times I have seen the young women with such a mass of beads of various colours round their necks as to occupy the whole space from the bosom to the chin, and quite to prevent their turning the head. The women wear a petticoat reaching below the knee, made of either their own bark-cloth or gaily coloured printed cottons obtained from the traders, which they wrap round their loins, tucking it in on one side above the hips. When dressed to receive company, they make the upper part of the body a deep vermillion,—a colour obtained from the pod of a kind of shrub in which it is found between the seeds. When required, it is taken out and collected in a little calabash ready for use. They use it by simply rubbing it into the skin, to which it imparts a soft and glossy appearance. They do not paint the face in broad bands of black and red streaks and blotches like the men, but have three or four fine lines drawn very evenly across the nose and cheeks under the eyes on the vermillion ground. I once saw a Woolwa at Kissalala, who had his hair dressed in a very curious fashion. It was tied and bound up behind in very much the same way as the old European "queue." I notice this, as it was the only time that I saw the mode among the Indians. On the present occasion, the Indians were drinking mishla all that day and the next, as it is their custom to leave none untouched. Another thing that makes me think that this kind of drinking is a religious ceremony, is that one of the party goes round the circle from time to time singing a sort of monotonous chant and beating a kind of drum, formed from one of the joints of a large bamboo, another accompanying him with a large sort of flute made from a small bamboo.

On the morning of the 14th I started for the Rama branch, which is about an easy day's journey from this place, in a dory with a young Woolwa from the upper settlement. We entered the Rama mouth early next morning. The view was pretty. We kept on till late in the afternoon without seeing a

place to camp, the banks being everywhere very low, with nothing but bamboo thickets thrown into great confusion by the hurricane. A short distance up the Rama there is a very remarkable conical-shaped hill standing some distance back. The Indians call it Assanuka.

Next day we kept on some distance further, but the current became very strong. About this part there is on the left bank an abrupt cliff of rock rising perpendicularly from the water, which appeared very deep at its base. The Indian settlements on this river are few in number, very high up indeed; the lower part is altogether too low for the Woolwas, who love to build their houses on the high banks above their rivers. Two days afterwards we returned to Kissalala. Shortly after, I recommenced my journey up the main river.

On the morning of the 30th we arrived at a place where the river is quite blocked up and lost to sight among great stones fallen from the side of a rocky hill. Here we had to carry pit-pans and everything over the hill by a long and steep but well-worn portage-path through the forest, striking the river again on the other side as it emerged from the obstructions in a rocky gorge. This was densely covered with vegetation, as indeed is every part of this river's course. After making one more portage we came to an Indian settlement; they gave us some cassada, and after bidding them adieu we camped further on.

Next day we passed an exceedingly difficult part of the river, and came to the place called the "second hill," where the river was again entirely lost amid the immense rocks. The portage-path was a very pleasant one, leading through the shady woods. It is noticeable that where a portage is much used the cavities in the rocks are filled with cedar shavings, some old and some fresh, scraped off the bottoms of the pit-pans by the rough surfaces of the stones. On arriving at the river on the other side of the hill we cooked our dinner on the gravel bank formed at the mouth of a shady little creek which here joins the river. This secluded little stream, called Billwass, was pointed out to me as having Woolwas living up it; and on many similar occasions I have noticed the predilection which these Indians seem to have for living far up little out-of-the-way creeks.

We again pushed on, and although the river still continued very difficult, its bed being quite filled with rocks, we reached a settlement which I afterwards learnt is called Woukee. It is so called from its being situated at the foot of the falls of that name, part of which is visible from the lodges. This is decidedly the prettiest settlement on the river, both from its situation, from the manner in which the houses are built, and the planted grounds around them kept. Besides the universal "Supa" palm, which when seen on the banks among the forest always marks the site of an old settlement, and others usually seen among the Woolwas, they had a good deal of chocolate and cotton, a fine bread-fruit and other fruit-trees. The old man, who seemed to be the patriarch of the place, was lame in one of his legs from the effects of a snake-bite. He said he had been much worse, but was now fast recovering.

We left Woukee next morning; the other men had already taken the pit-pans and their loads over the succession of rapids and falls above the settlement, beyond which they awaited us. To join them we had to walk along a rugged track, skirting the forest, with sharp pieces of rock cropping out of the ground in all directions, and over fallen trees, now again by the water's edge climbing from one mass of water-worn rock to another, until we at last reached the canoes.

On the 7th we arrived at a place called Ka-ka. Temple said the Woolwas told him that this was the last settlement of their tribe on this river. This I very much doubt, for although the river had become a small stream, yet there must have been for a considerable distance further a good deal more water than in many of the creeks inhabited by them which flow into the river lower down. Ka-ka is a pretty little place, lying bedded as it does in the surrounding

woods. On the opposite side of the river, which is here narrow, there was an especially beautiful wall of verdure; the tall straight shafts of the tree-trunks and limbs appearing at intervals between the varied foliage, pretty flowering vines, caught up here and there in festoons or hanging down in waving tresses, the snake-like coil of the tough bush-ropes and the elegant fronds of a palm, occasionally breaking the outline of foliage. On one side of the lodges there flowed into the river what at home would be called a trout stream, the same slabs of rocks, the same deep pools, little falls and brawling shallows; but here the elegant palm, occasional tree-fern, and many other strange forms of vegetation only known to the tropics, overhung the glancing water, and from the green walls that shut the stream in on either side, and through which only an occasional refracted beam of sunlight could find its way, came the strange cries of the parrots, toucans, trogons, and other birds whose notes harmonised well with the scene. At this place there was the largest plantation of sugarcane I had seen in the country. These Indians make a very palatable kind of sugar, which they mould into cakes and eat with their plantain and baked cassada.

On the 9th, Temple and I started for Consuelo. The track, which was very faint in some places, led through a damp and gloomy forest crossing a creek several times, thence up the side of a steep hill covered with tall trees, closely intermixed with some of a shorter and thicker growth, saplings and dwarf palms, the whole bound together here and there with bush-ropes. It was impossible to get any view of the surrounding country until we got to the very top, where there was a small opening with a little grass. Suddenly emerging from the tangled forest, a good deal exhausted by the wearisome climb, having often to creep under or climb over trees and branches that had fallen across the track, we came unexpectedly on a view of great extent and beauty. The plain beneath stretched far away, with hills of different elevation, to distant mountains. The day was so unusually clear that the Indians pointed out on the distant slopes the savannahs, which could be distinguished by their light brown tint. These, they told me, were the mountains and savannahs of Matagalpa. I never afterwards had an opportunity of getting a clear view from this eminence, as on subsequent visits there were always mists and vapours hanging about the forest-covered sides of the hill.

Animal life seemed scarce in these woods; we only met one snake, and that a small insignificant brown little fellow, but the Indians seemed to dread it a good deal, as they took the trouble to cut a long stick, beat it to death, and throw it out of the path before they would pass the spot. After leaving the open space on the summit, we did not take long in going down the steep descent on the other side, which led to a narrow valley evidently but recently cleared of its timber. One thing that surprised me during the fatiguing march through the forest was that the sun was always before us, by which we knew that we had been going nearly due east since leaving Ka-ka. This surprised me, because I had formerly thought that all the settlements in Spanish country lay due west. We stopped to make enquiry at the first hut we came to after leaving the woods. We were surprised to find that this place was one of the Chontales mines, having previously imagined from the map I had seen that the course of the Blewfields River would have carried me far north of these. The people also appeared exceedingly perplexed at seeing me emerge from the forest with Temple and several Woolwas behind. They were so shut in by the forest-covered hills on all sides that they never dreamt of the possibility of any one arriving among them, except by the road from the Lake Nicaragua through the town of Libertad.

Captain Pim, R.N., arrived on a visit to Chontales whilst I was there. He seemed to entertain, with Dr. Seemann at the Javali mines, the idea of opening communication with Blewfields by means of a mule-track through the forest to Kissalala, and thence by means of a small craft on the river, the river being,

as I assured him, quite free from obstruction until just below that place. This, of course, would be a great saving of distance; for, as it is, all communication with the coast must pass by way of Lake Nicaragua, the San Juan River, and Grey Town. If this be accomplished, the Nicaraguans will probably make a push to obtain possession of Blewfields, as they did before in the case of Grey Town. It is to be hoped that the Government of England would deal more honourably by our old Mosquito friends than was the case in the treaty of 1861, of which, whenever it was mentioned (for the natives frequently questioned me about it), I felt very much ashamed.

On the 23rd March, in the afternoon, I left Santo Domingo for Ka-ka, on my way back to the coast.

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